

# A critical analysis of the impact of indigent policies on socio-economic inequalities in South Africa: A case of Amathole District Municipality

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## Abstract

At the heart of local government administration and the inherent ability to deliver core services to the people is a progressive and responsive policy that is inclusive of the social values of society. This manuscript examines the nexus between indigent policy and the challenges local governments face, focusing on the Amathole District Municipality (ADM) in South Africa. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), the study investigates how indigent policies intersect with socioeconomic disparities, drawing on secondary data sources and African theoretical perspectives. It highlights historical and contemporary factors shaping these policies and their impact on marginalised communities, revealing systemic inequalities within them. This paper employed an interpretivism paradigm and a qualitative approach, and it relied on secondary data that was analysed through themes. The study underscores the importance of inclusive and responsive policies in addressing core service delivery and societal values. While acknowledging the indigent policy's role in alleviating inequality and poverty, it identifies shortcomings in addressing unemployment. Recommendations include concurrent implementation of the policy with social grants, local economic development, and public works programs, alongside community empowerment and long-term monitoring for sustainable socioeconomic development. By offering insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars, the research contributes to evidence-based policymaking and social justice efforts in South Africa. It emphasizes the need for holistic approaches that prioritize equity and social justice, fostering inclusive and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** *indigent, policy, poverty, inequality, social justice, unemployment*

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## 1. Introduction

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In a bid to alleviate poverty, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were developed and adopted, and SDG number 10 explicitly speaks about inequality reduction to be achieved by 2030 (United Nations (UN), 2023). Regionally, the African continent has ascribed to the 2063 Agenda aimed at ensuring democratic values, practices, universal principles of human rights and the entrenched rule of law. South Africa is regarded as the most unequal country in the world as it experiences a skewed income distribution, unequal access to opportunities, and regional disparities (International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2020; Mtapuri & Tinarwo, 2021). In pre-1994, South Africa experienced apartheid, which was characterised by inequalities and injustices. Amid these historical injustices, indigent policies tend to be the beacon of hope, promising to redress past imbalances and shaping a way to inclusive prosperity. However, the effectiveness and efficiencies of these policies remain a fallacy, prompting the researchers to ascertain the impact of indigent policies on socioeconomic inequalities. Within the South African local government, the government introduced the indigent policy as a vital tool in tackling poverty and inequality. These challenges are not peculiar to South Africa; almost all African countries face the same challenges. Several initiatives have been proposed and implemented in South Africa to counter such challenges, such as the National Development Plan (NDP) detailing how this must be achieved by 2030. This study seeks to unravel the multifaceted dynamic encompassing municipal indigent policies and their role in addressing inequality issues in South Africa. By employing a rigorous exercise on the National Framework for Municipal Indigent Policy Framework (NFMIP), theoretical insights and empirical evidence, the study seeks to illuminate the intended outcomes of the indigent policies while advocating for in-depth consideration of their inferences for social justice and equitable development.

According to the National Indigent Policy Framework (2005), the municipality is responsible for ensuring that all the citizens have access to their constitutional rights of having access to a basic level of service. In 2005, municipalities adopted an indigent policy that embodies indigent support to increase the beneficiaries' quality of life by assisting them in exiting from their indigence (ADM Annual Report, 2018). Surprisingly, the situation on the ground paints a bleak picture as socio-economic inequalities and political compromise characterise South African society. Although indigent policies offer temporary relief to indigents, they tend to fall short of addressing the root causes of inequalities, perpetuate

dependency and reinforce existing power dynamics. The inability of the state to adequately deal with these challenges impairs the social well-being of communities, among other things. Kuhlengisa et al. (2022) note the indigent policy as one of the important vehicles in addressing social ills at the local government level and ensuring that basic services to the people are a reality.

South Africa is the most unequal society in the world, and the unfortunate part is that people living in rural areas are heavily affected as they are the poorest of the poorest citizens (Ngarava, 2023). This study was necessitated by the need to determine the impact the indigent policy has had on reducing inequality in the municipality. The study seeks to answer the question on how the indigent policies in South Africa influence and perpetuate socio-economic inequalities and their implications for social justice and equitable development. The study seeks to reduce the research gap as there is limited evaluation of the impact of indigent policies on socioeconomic inequality in the Amathole District Municipality. Therefore, this study is not merely an academic work but a moral imperative. It adopts a critical lens informed by interdisciplinary scholarship based on political economy, public administration, and public policy studies. Through the positioning of indigent policies within a broader framework of critical race theory, the study seeks to unpack the ideological underpinnings and constraints that affect the design, implementation, and impact of indigent policies, while also comparatively giving an indigenous theoretical and conceptual perspective.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. State of Indigence in South Africa***

Official Statistics South Africa (StasSA) report in the first quarter recorded that South Africa's unemployment rate is 34.5% (Stats SA, 2022). In addition, despite South Africa's progress in reducing poverty since 1994, the trajectory of poverty reduction was reversed between 2011 and 2015; the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic further strained this. According to the World Bank (2020), approximately 55.5% of people in South Africa live below the poverty line. Poverty is not a static condition; amongst South African poor, a small positive shock to incomes has a possibility of lifting many out of poverty; however, a marginal shock could drive as many of the vulnerable into poverty. Since 2020, many households in South Africa have been vulnerable to shocks such as pandemics and disasters ranging from COVID-19 to the KwaZulu Natal floods (Pillay, 2021).

These are indicators that there is a need for a proper strategy aimed at addressing such challenges. The other challenge that South Africa is confronted with is inequality, as South Africa is regarded as the most unequal society (World Bank, 2020). Since the dawn of democracy, racial inequalities, in particular those who reside in rural areas, has been exacerbated. With the advent of the COVID-19 global pandemic, it was estimated that extreme poverty would increase in South Africa by close to 10% (World Bank, 2020). This downward trend of livelihoods and communities experiencing high poverty levels and hardship was evident before the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been attributed to many factors, such as corruption, poor governance, lack of political will and non-implementation of policy. However, evidence from previous crises of even smaller scales suggests that these negative effects could last across generations and further exacerbate South Africa's high inequality. It is against these assertions that the researchers seek to assess the developmental role of the Municipal Indigent Policy in addressing the issues of unemployment, poverty and inequality referred to in this study as the triple challenge.

## ***2.2. Unlocking the municipal indigent policy's full potential in South Africa***

Regardless of the economic growth and improvement in other facets of welfare, unemployment, poverty, and inequality remain a pervasive and complex phenomenon in South Africa (Kuhlengisa, 2021). Implementing the Indigent policies in South African municipalities reflects a progressive evolution in understanding the role municipalities can play in the fight against the triple challenges confronting South Africa (Leburu, 2018). For the indigent policy to achieve its full potential in dealing with the triple challenges, it must be brought up and sustained (Kuhlengisa, 2021). While also ensuring that all stakeholders play their role in realising the objectives of indigent policies. Against the backdrop of policy failures is also the lack of political will and non-upholding of accountability practices in the public service and the local sphere of government (Rulashe & Ijeoma, 2022).

Scaling up the policy involves dealing with a series of technical issues to identify parameters, tools and processes that can deliver maximum benefits to the poor and the vulnerable, (Leburu, 2018; Ruiters, 2018; Kuhlengisa, 2021). Implementing the indigent policies in South Africa aims to ensure that the most vulnerable and the poorest households can reach a minimum level of consumption and cover their basic needs (Leburu, 2018). Similarly, Kuhlengisa (2021) argues that the indigent policy is often more central in low-

income settings characterised by poverty. In addition, Ruiters (2018) and Pillay (2021) postulate that implementing indigent policy within the South African setting has boosted consumption and lowered poverty.

### ***2.3. Conceptualising the Amathole District Municipality Indigent Policy***

South Africa, as a development state, requires a developmental approach to addressing the social ills that are confronting the country (Kuhlengisa, 2021). Municipality, as a government closer to the people, is committed to providing supportive initiatives to enhance community development by addressing the inequalities, poverty, and unemployment issues (Pillay, 2021). A developmental institution is committed to providing supportive measures to assist and empower the community (Leburu, 2018). According to the National Indigent Policy Framework (2005), the municipality is responsible for ensuring that all citizens have access to their constitutional rights and a basic level of service. In 2005, municipalities adopted an indigent policy that embodies indigent support to increase the beneficiaries' quality of life by assisting them in exiting from their indigence (ADM Annual Report, 2018).

The main objectives of the policy are aimed at providing sustainable basic municipal services to locals within the confines of the municipality's administrative and financial capacity as well as establishing a framework to identify and manage indigent households inclusive of a socio-economic analysis (Leburu, 2018). In addition, the policy seeks to enhance cooperative governance with other spheres of the government and provide procedures and guidelines for subsidising basic charges and free basic services to indigent households (Pillay, 2021). The grant depends on the availability of funds from the national treasury through an equitable share, and the grant is only given if the occupier of the property or owner is staying on the premises (ADM Indigent Policy 2023). Individuals guilty of malpractices will forfeit the payment of the grant (National Indigent Policy Framework, 2005).

A registered indigent holder is supposed to receive minimum standards of basic services such as water services, sanitation, and electricity (ADM Indigent Policy, 2023). Municipalities have a responsibility and a sole description to determine their own criterion in choosing indigent beneficiaries within their jurisdiction (ADM Annual Report 2021). According to ADM Indigent policy (2023), indigent households have access to 6000l of water per month, and they have access to 50 kWh of electricity per month. To qualify for indigent support, one must be a property owner, possess valid South African identity documents and

provide proof that their household total income is equivalent to two times the Government social grants.

Although the various national policies make suggestions in this regard, the final decision lies with the municipality, and there are significant variations in qualifying criteria and registration processes (ADM Indigent Policy 2023). The ADM indigent policy requires anyone applying for indigent support to complete a formal indigent application form and provide proof of unemployment, proof of income, and a letter from the employer if the person applying for support, is a domestic worker. Indigent support is only valid for twenty-four months, and the beneficiaries must reapply at the end of this period.

#### ***2.4. Nature of Indigency in South Africa***

Poverty, unemployment, and inequalities within the South African context may be attributed to the legacies of the apartheid system, where most of the black communities were deprived of basic socio-economic development (Pillay, 2021). Ruiters (2018) believes that poverty and unemployment in rural communities and urban spaces of South Africa have a historical connection. A study by Haas and Osland (2014) indicated that poverty and high levels of unemployment in most urban areas are triggered by rural-urban migration. This assertion is supported by Kuhlengisa (2021), who postulates that poverty in rural communities, where people cannot access necessities and basic services, is widespread. Service delivery inequality within the South African context is a result of historical legacies, and this has played a significant role in influencing municipal resources and efficiency (Sartorius & Sartorius, 2016). Despite the inequality issues being a global phenomenon, it is worth noting that in most instances' municipalities have always prioritised allocating limited resources to the rich at the expense of the poor (Warner & Hefetz, 2002; Sartorius & Sartorius, 2016).

Service delivery patterns in South Africa indicate that district municipalities in poor rural provinces, such as the Eastern Cape, have very low levels of service delivery. In this context, rural municipalities are confronted uniformly by a lack of resources, infrastructure, and skills across all municipalities in their areas (Kuhlengisa, 2021). This is a cause for concern as it is evident that the indigent policy in these areas is bound to fail as there are no services to start with. Inequality, unemployment and poverty are what both South African rural and urban settings are confronted with, which explains the need and the provision of indigent support amongst struggling households. Pillay (2021) postulates that following Chapter 6 of the

National Development Plan (NDP) Vision 2030, the government seeks to alleviate poverty and inequality among all races and classes by the year 2030, and this strengthens the need to stimulate rural economies to ensure that people, get the basic needs and employment as part of enhancing human development. The critical race theory underpins this study.

### ***2.5. A global Indigent policy perspective***

The support and development of indigents is not only a South African phenomenon but the struggle of every state and government across the globe as nations grapple with the challenges of providing adequate social support and assistance to their most vulnerable populations. Historically, the foundations of modern social assistance schemes can be traced to established patterns of charity, often institutionalised and governed by formal religious or statutory norms. For instance, in early Saxon England, Canon and secular law supported the Christian practice of tithing. Similarly, in the Arab world, private charity became a central aspect of Islamic tradition following the advent of Islam. The processes of industrialisation and urbanisation over the past two centuries have profoundly affected social security arrangements globally. The origins of the modern social security system can be traced back to late nineteenth-century Europe, although its characteristic features developed primarily in the three decades following the Second World War.

In many developing countries, innovative social protection programs have been introduced in recent decades, reflecting a growing recognition of the need to address the challenges faced by the poor and marginalised (Ghai, 2003). The diffusion of ideas and practices has played a crucial role in the creation of social welfare services in the developing world.

Table 1

Global social welfare initiatives

Country	Policy	Articulation	Comparative Outlook
<b>Republic of South Africa</b>	<i>National Framework For Municipal Indigent Policies</i>	South Africa's indigent policy aims to provide basic services such as water, electricity, and sanitation at reduced or no cost to qualifying low-income households. Each municipality develops and implements its policy, which typically includes criteria for identifying indigent households, such as income thresholds and social circumstances.	This policy's effectiveness in providing essential services to the poor can be compared with similar social support mechanisms in other countries
<b>Federative Republic of Brazil</b>	<i>Bolsa Família Program (PBF)</i>	Bolsa Família is a conditional cash transfer program that provides financial aid to low-income families in Brazil. To receive benefits, families must ensure that their children attend school and receive vaccinations. The program aims to reduce poverty and improve health and education outcomes.	To Compare the direct financial support and conditional requirements of Bolsa Família with South Africa's provision of essential services as they both focus on the impacts on poverty alleviation and long-term socioeconomic outcomes and relief.
<b>Republic of India</b>	<i>Public Distribution System (PDS) and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)</i>	PDS provides subsidized food and non-food items to India's poor. MGNREGA guarantees at least 100 days of wage employment per year to rural households whose adult members volunteer for unskilled manual work	The food security and employment guarantees provided by PDS and MGNREGA align with some of South Africa's provisions for basic services. These are imperative for household stability and economic empowerment.
<b>United Mexican States</b>	<i>Prospera (formerly Oportunidades/ Progresa)</i>	Prospera is a conditional cash transfer program focused on improving health, education, and nutrition among low-income families. Conditions include regular health check-ups and school attendance.	Health and education conditions attached to Prospera benefit marginalised communities and citizens and relate to South Africa's service-based support.
<b>Republic of Korea ( South Korea)</b>	<i>National Basic Livelihood Security System (NBLSS)</i>	NBLSS provides comprehensive social assistance, including cash benefits, healthcare, and housing support to low-income families in South Korea. The system is designed to ensure a minimum standard of living.	The comprehensive support provided by NBLSS, including cash and services, just like South Africa's indigent policy gives breadth and depth of support aimed at alleviating poverty.
<b>United States of America</b>	<i>Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)</i>	SNAP offers food-purchasing assistance to low- and no-income individuals and families. TANF provides temporary financial assistance and promotes work through various support services.	Both countries through such initiatives offer relief to needy families through various social relief and development programmes. While the TANF provides temporary financial assistance to deserving struggling individuals and families the South African indigent policy ensures legitimate individuals and families receive basic services like water and electricity free or at discounted costs.
<b>Canada</b>	<i>Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) and Canada Child Benefit (CCB)</i>	GIS provides additional income to low-income elderly individuals receiving Old Age Security (OAS). CCB offers financial support for families with children under 18.	The targeted support for the elderly and families with children in Canada is similar to that of South Africa's general indigent support.

Source: Author's Construction



International aid and donor agencies have increasingly emphasized the importance of universal health care and social protection, leading to the emergence of large-scale social assistance programs in countries such as China, India, and Brazil, which collectively cover hundreds of millions of people (Midgley et al., 2019). However, the specific nature of these arrangements continues to reflect each society's values, beliefs, and customs, as well as their economic systems, social structures, and political institutions (Ghai, 2003).

South Africa's municipal indigent policy aims to alleviate poverty and promote social inclusion by providing essential services such as water, electricity, and sanitation to low-income households (National Treasury of South Africa, 2016). Similarly, Brazil's Bolsa Família program tackles poverty through conditional cash transfers, ensuring that children in low-income families attend school and receive health check-ups, thus improving both education and health outcomes (Lindert et al., 2007). In India, the Public Distribution System (PDS) secures food for vulnerable households, while the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) offers guaranteed wage employment to rural families, providing both food security and income support (Dreze & Khera, 2013; Ministry of Rural Development, 2019). Mexico's Prospera program also uses conditional cash transfers to enhance the health, education, and nutrition of low-income families, demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted social assistance in reducing multidimensional poverty (Levy & Rodríguez, 2005). South Korea's National Basic Livelihood Security System goes further by providing comprehensive support, including cash benefits, healthcare, and housing assistance, ensuring a minimum standard of living for all citizens (Kim, 2013). Despite differences in implementation, these policies collectively highlight the diverse approaches countries use to support vulnerable populations and reduce poverty, tailored to their unique social, economic, and political contexts.

## ***2.6. Critical Race Theory***

This study is underpinned by the Critical Race Theory (CRT) propounded by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Peller and Kendall (1995). Though this theory has been used in studies about race, it is relevant in this study as it emphasises intersectionality, power dynamics, counter-narratives and transformative justice (Conradie 2016). Using the CRT, the researchers aim to analyse how indigent policies have perpetuated or alleviated inequalities within the Amathole District Municipal areas, given the legacies of discrimination and existing power

imbalances between the rich and the poor. The CRT lens allows the study to understand the intricacies implicit in municipal indigent policies and their impact on indigent communities. The CRT assumes socioeconomic inequalities are socially constructed products of social thought and relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Yosso et al. (2009) indicate that CRT assumes issues of inequality as entrenched within socioeconomic and political systems. In this vein, Boateng (2014) posits that inequalities are socially constructed where the poor are blamed for their plight. In line with this, it can be argued that inequalities are constructed by the economic and social policies that the government choose, the voices they listen to, the rights they choose to support and the rights they ignore. Therefore, this means that the people involved in designing indigent policies, the nature of services provided to indigents through the indigent policies, and how the indigent beneficiaries will be selected either perpetuate or reduce inequalities. Municipal Indigent policies in South Africa operate within a wider structural framework that tends to perpetuate economic disparities (Claar & Skinner, 2021). CRT assists the researcher in determining how municipal indigent policies unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities by not adequately addressing the structural roots of poverty and indigents.

According to CRT, individuals experience several forms of discrimination attributed to their gender and social class, termed intersectionality (Yosso et al., 2009). This is in line with indigents as they encounter different forms of discrimination based on their race, social class and gender. In the context of South Africa, it can be noted that indigents face barriers in accessing basic services due to intersecting factors that include geographical location, social status and gender. Therefore, this study seeks to ascertain if the indigent policies in ADM ensure that all indigents have access to basic services, thereby reducing or perpetuating existing inequalities. Delgado and Stefancic (2000) posit that CRT notes that individuals from vulnerable groups encounter different treatment and discrimination within the systems of power and authority. In line with municipal indigent policies, this theory explains how indigents may encounter discrimination in accessing basic services due to eligibility criteria and access to information. The eligibility criteria stipulated within ADM indigent policy and how information is disseminated to the potential beneficiaries can reduce or perpetuate inequalities.

CRT supports the promotion of counter-narratives that question the dominant discourses and speak truth to power, thereby prioritising the voices of those affected (Crenshaw et al., 1995). In line with the ADM indigent policy, CRT emphasises the significance of considering indigent perspectives in designing and implementing policies. The study will assess how indigents are involved in the designing and implementing indigent policies and the nature of involvement as the nature of involvement can reduce or perpetuate inequalities. Delgado and Stefancic (2000) highlight that CRT advocates for a transformative approach to justice to deal with the root causes of inequalities. Based on the ADM indigent policies, it can be noted that CRT supports an indigent policy that is transformative and dismantles all levels of inequality and past injustices. Through the employment of the CRT lens in this study, this section irradiates the power dynamics and structural injustices that shape parents of free basic services delivery in indigent societies in ADM. By holistically understanding such dynamics, policymakers can work towards equitable and inclusive indigent policies premised on social justice and human rights.

### ***2.7. Indigent policy Afrocentric Theoretic and conceptual dispositions***

Additionally, this study articulates African-centered theories and conceptual dispositions regarding the socioeconomic implications of indigent policies in South Africa. This is accomplished through the utilization of a multidimensional analytical framework rooted in African philosophies and post-colonial perspectives. By integrating Afrocentric theoretical and conceptual frameworks, Ubuntu philosophy, African communalism, decolonial thought, African feminist theories, critical Indigenous studies, and post-colonial perspectives, this paper meticulously examines the complex intersections between indigent policies and the historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid. By synthesizing insights derived from these diverse theoretical lenses, the study aims to elucidate the complexities inherent in indigent policies in South Africa and their implications for achieving socio-economic justice.

Table 2 reflects some of the ‘Critical Indigenous’ perspectives that attempt to give an Afrocentric disposition of theories and concepts that could contribute to the realisation of an indigent policy that can address the socio-economic challenges and social ills faced by the majority of societies in South Africa. These, among other, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and perspectives should be encouraged to ensure a post-colonial paradigm shift.

**Table 2***Taxonomy of Indigent policy: Afrocentric theories and concepts*

Theory/ Concept	Scholarship	Articulation
Ubuntu Philosophy	Ubuntu emphasizes mutual respect, community life, and the interdependence of individuals. It can be used to evaluate whether indigent policies foster community solidarity and collective well-being over individual wealth accumulation (Ukwamedua, N., 2011)	In modern-day South Africa, the government encourages public participation in policy formulation and implementation. This is to ensure that the values of society are enshrined the public policies. Observing principles like the 'Batho Pele' as articulated in The White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (1997) the 'Ubuntu Philosophy' is embedded as it purports 'Putting People first.
African Communalism	African communalism pertains to the emphasis on the community's needs over individual desires. You could assess if indigent policies are aligned with communal strategies to reduce socioeconomic disparities (Higgs, P., 2012)	This disposition is anchored around mutuality with 'Ubuntu Philosophy' where the common existence of humans in communal settings feeds the need to collectively strive for common values. It advocates for Collective Decision-Making, especially in policymaking, Resource Sharing and Redistribution, Equal Access to Services, Cultural Preservation and Revitalization, Conflict Resolution and Social Justice, Interdependence and Solidarity.
Decolonial Thought	Decolonial thought challenges dominant Western-centric epistemologies and methodologies by advocating for the recognition and incorporation of diverse local knowledge and perspectives. In the context of South African indigent policy, decolonial thought prompts a re-evaluation of the underlying assumptions and power dynamics inherent in the formulation and implementation of such policies. It calls for an interrogation of how colonial legacies continue to shape socioeconomic inequalities and inform policy interventions. Decolonial thought emphasizes the importance of centring marginalized voices and indigenous knowledge systems in policy-making processes to ensure more equitable and inclusive outcomes. Mignolo, W. (2009)	While the democratic dispensation is 30 years old a lot of colonial legacies remain in the realm of society, legislation and scholarship. 'Decolonial Thought' encourages a paradigm shift that will result in Africans reigniting indigenous values that will contribute positively to their developmental needs.  This requires an understanding of the historical context and thus policies need to redress the injustices of the past as well as the epistemic injustices embedded in the colonial knowledge systems.  The emergence of Indigenous scholarship and theory will certainly in the near future translate to the ascendance of a Decolonial Thought'.

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African Feminism	African Feminism draws from critical perspectives on gender, power, and liberation within the context of African societies and the broader global feminist movement. It challenges patriarchal norms, colonial legacies, and intersecting systems of oppression while centring on the experiences and agency of African women.	Black women in South Africa have endured intersecting forms of oppression stemming from colonialism, apartheid, and persisting systemic discrimination. Throughout history, they have been marginalized economically, subjected to gender-based violence, and denied reproductive autonomy, while their political representation remains disproportionately low.
	“For me, feminism is an existential and material response to the problem of male dominance in the world.” Gqola, P.D. (2015)	African feminist perspectives illuminate the intersectionality of their oppression, emphasizing the need for policies addressing race, gender, class, and other social factors. Despite strides made towards democracy, black women continue to face multifaceted discrimination, underscoring the imperative for transformative change to achieve social justice and equality for all.
	“We cannot afford to ignore the complex, culturally specific forms of femicide, infanticide, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and forced pregnancy”. Tamale, S. (2011)	

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Source: Authors’ perspective

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach and a case study design where ADM is referred to as a case. The case study design enabled the researchers to analyse the existing data to understand the contextual aspects of the impact of indigent policies on socio-economic inequalities in-depth and comprehensively. Data was collected using secondary data collection methods, and information was obtained from grey literature and peer-reviewed journal articles to ensure the reliability of the results. The inclusion criteria for selecting data sources were carefully defined. Firstly, only articles and reports published between 2018 and 2024 were considered, ensuring the use of the most recent and relevant data. Secondly, the relevance of sources was a critical factor, with priority given to those directly addressing the themes of socioeconomic and geographical inequalities, structural inequalities, intersectional impacts, and unintended consequences related to FBS. Lastly, the quality of the sources was ensured by selecting reputable journals and credible organisations' grey literature. The process of selection and elimination of articles involved multiple stages to maintain the study's scientific rigour. An initial broad search was conducted using academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, and Scopus. Keywords included "socioeconomic inequalities,"

"geographical inequalities," "Free Basic Services," "structural inequalities," and "intersectional impact." Afterwards, articles were screened based on titles and abstracts to ascertain their relevance to the study's themes. Selected articles then subjected to a full-text review to confirm their relevance and quality. Articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria or did not significantly contribute to understanding the themes were excluded.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. This method allows for a detailed and nuanced understanding of the data. The analysis identified five main themes: reinforcement of socioeconomic inequalities, geographical inequalities in providing Free Basic Services (FBS), inability to deal with structural inequalities, intersectional impact on indigent individuals, and unintended consequences. Each theme was explored to provide a comprehensive understanding of how FBS policies impact various forms of inequality. By systematically selecting and analysing relevant literature, this methodology ensures a robust and scientifically sound exploration of the themes related to Free Basic Services and their broader social impacts. The researchers acknowledge potential bias in selecting ADM as a case and relying on secondary data since these decisions were influenced by our own perspective and the inherent limitations of the available data sources.

## 4. Results

The findings of this research have been structured around five themes, namely the reinforcement of socioeconomic inequalities, geographical inequalities in the provision of FBS, inability to deal with structural inequalities, intersectional impact on indigent individuals and unintended consequences (see table 3). These themes emerged from the analysis of grey literature and peer-reviewed articles.

**Table 3**

*Emerging themes*

Theme Number	Identified Theme
Theme 1	reinforcement of socioeconomic inequalities
Theme 2	geographical inequalities in the provision of FBS
Theme 3	inability to deal with structural inequalities
Theme 4	intersectional impact on indigent individuals
Theme 5	unintended consequences

Source: Researchers Construction 2024

### ***Theme 1: Reinforcement of existing socioeconomic inequalities***

The study revealed that in its current form, ADM indigent policy reinforces existing socioeconomic inequalities. The ADM Indigent Policy (2023) indicated that the municipality provided only 6000 litres of potable water to indigent households monthly. This amount of water translates to the provision of 25 litres of water per individual per day. However, studies have shown that this amount of water is inadequate for human survival as the accepted standard is at least 50 litres per day per individual (Maramura, 2017; Shayamano, 2020; World Health Organisation, 2010). Providing inadequate potable water to indigents negatively impacts their overall lives and their ability to plan for the future.

Providing inadequate water to indigents living in rural areas leaves them with no option but to gather water from other sources that may not be safe for drinking. In addition, in Africa, 80% of water gathering is done by women and girls; these people spend hours each day walking to collect water, losing more productive time that could have been used working or going to school, reinforcing existing socioeconomic inequalities. In South Africa, women are victims of sexual assaults and rape; water collection can be dangerous as women are vulnerable to attacks, thereby perpetuating inequalities. It should be noted that, providing inadequate water to indigents enhances the burden of waterborne diseases and causes poor living standards (Hara et al., 2020). As a result of insufficient water provided through the indigent policies, indigents are susceptible to waterborne diarrhoea-causing pathogens such as *Vibrio*, *Cryptosporidium*, and *Salmonella*. On the other hand, providing inadequate water services to indigents in towns and urban areas would result in them having to buy water from vendors, which perpetuates socioeconomic inequalities. Khabo-Mmekoa and Momba (2020) argue that providing indigents with inadequate water exposes them to the unregulated water black market, allowing vendors to increase the cost of water at their will.

Another finding from this study is that the ADM indigent policy notes the provision of sanitation; however, its failure to determine the minimum adequate human disposal is a cause for concern, perpetuating inequalities. The ADM issued a tender of R600m aimed at the construction of toilets for indigents, which resulted in these toilets not being built and of those that were built, substandard work was done, resulting in some collapsing. Despite the good intentions, this has negatively impacted indigents within the municipality. In the informal settlements, indigents are provided mobile toilets through indigent support (ADM Indigent Policy, 2023). This is a cause for concern as it reinforces existing inequalities since sharing a

toilet is uncomfortable and undignified as people are different, and some are not clean (Njingana, 2019). Consequently, this study argues that the current system of providing mobile toilets to indigents is unhygienic and makes it very difficult for children to use these toilets as they are not clean most of the time. Therefore, it can be noted that despite the ADM indigent policies anticipated to alleviate poverty, it has perpetuated existing socioeconomic inequalities as indigents in rural areas and informal settlements continue to encounter barriers in accessing basic services even though the municipality is implementing the indigent policy. This has exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities as it reinforces cycles of poverty. These findings discussed above align with the CRT, which postulates that inequalities are socially constructed where the poor are blamed for their plight. As a result, it can be argued that inequalities are constructed by indigent policies that the municipality chooses, the voices they listen to, the rights they choose to support and the rights they ignore. Therefore, this means that the people involved in designing indigent policies, the nature of services provided to indigents through the indigent policies, and how the indigent beneficiaries are selected perpetuate inequalities.

### ***Theme 2: Geographical inequalities in the provision of Free Basic Services***

Another theme from analysing different sources is geographic inequalities in providing FBS. The study noted that the ADM indigent policy led to geographic inequalities in providing basic services. Kuhlengisa (2021) highlighted that the ADM indigent policy does not entail how infrastructure can be developed. The silence of this indigent policy on how the infrastructure issue can be addressed has resulted in geographical inequalities in this provision of FBS, as the urban indigents tend to benefit more than their rural counterparts. According to the ADM indigent policy (2023), indigents in urban areas can access free potable water using a yard tap. On the other hand, indigents in rural areas have access to water using a communal tap, and often, they must travel some distance to fetch water. Conversely, indigents in urban areas have access to water from the comfort of their homes (Murei et al., 2022). As a result of the apartheid regime, South African rural areas encounter challenges that include inadequate infrastructure and failure of the ADM indigent policy to address infrastructure matters, perpetuating inequalities. Several rural areas within the ADM have been without access to potable water for years, such as villages in the Ngqushwa area where it is alleged that these areas are benefiting from indigent support (Ngqushwa Indigent Policy, 2023). Ensuring that



people apply and register for indigent support and fail to provide the services stipulated within the indigent policy because of their geographical location perpetuates inequalities.

***Theme 3: Inability to deal with structural inequalities.***

Despite the ADM indigent policy's positive intentions to alleviate poverty and reduce inequalities in its current form, it has failed to address structural inequalities. This is because this policy has failed to address the underlying systemic issues that strengthen inequalities attributed to the policies' design, implementation, and unintended consequences. ADM Indigent policy (2023) indicates that the municipality decides on the services to be delivered to indigents, and the elected officials are responsible for verifying the indigent who would have applied for indigent support. This is a cause for concern as it reflects that the indigents do not have a say in determining the services they ought to receive. Kuhlengisa et al. (2022) revealed that the failure of municipalities to include those directly affected by the policy in the designing of the policies perpetuates inequalities as they may consider their voices insignificant in matters that affect them. According to the National Framework for Municipal Indigent Policies (2003), which gives guidelines for formulating indigent policies, ward councillors should play an active role in the indigent verification.

In line with this framework, the ADM indigent policy (2023) regards ward councillors as responsible for verifying indigents, and this perpetuates structural inequalities. Molefe and Overton-de Klerk (2019) argue that using ward councillors in government programmes may be catastrophic as priority may be given to communities or individuals based on party lines instead of genuine needs. This may result in indigent support directed towards political cadres excluding or marginalising other indigents. Perpetuating inequalities along party lines. Another challenge is associated with patronage networks where ward councillors may use the indigent verification process as a tool for the consolidation of power and enable control over their constituencies. Fourie and Van der Waldt (2023) bemoaned the involvement of ward committees in rolling out government programmes as leading to cronyism, resulting in uneven distribution of indigent benefits. As a result of cronyism, opposition groups may further be marginalised, exacerbating structural inequalities. It is worth noting that the use of ward councillors in the verification of indigents may strengthen existing power dynamics within communities where politicians exert disproportionate influence over who receives indigent support and who can be excluded from benefiting from indigent support. This can result in the

deepening of the divide between elected officials and the marginalised groups, with the communities further entrenching structural inequalities (Molefe & Overton-de Klerk, 2019; Mbandlwa & Mishi, 2020).

The CRT underpinning this study posits that power dynamics significantly shape social relations and policy outcomes. Given the discussion on the use of ward councillors in the verification process, politicians tend to benefit from these power structures. It can be noted that in designing indigent policies with the ADM, the interests of elected officials are prioritised. Using the lenses of the CRT, it can be said that the ADM indigent policy is not transformative as it serves to maintain existing power dynamics. The CRT argues that the structural nature of inequality in South Africa is embedded in socioeconomic and political systems, and given the discussion in this section, it can be noted that the indigent policy operates in a broader structural framework that strengthens inequalities. In line with the CRT, this study argues that ADM indigent policies unintentionally perpetuate existing inequalities because they fail to sufficiently address the structural roots of poverty and indigency.

#### ***Theme 4: Intersectional impact on indigent individuals***

According to ADM Indigent Policy (2023), indigent households must have 6000 litres of monthly potable water, translating to 25 litres per person daily. Scholars such as Maramura (2017) and Shayamano (2020) argue that people must have access to 50 litres of potable water daily. The ADM indigent policy (2023) provided 50kWh of electricity per month to indigent households to cater for heating and lighting. Ledger (2021) believes that the 50kWh of electricity, as identified by the indigent policies, is not enough and strengthens already existing inequalities, and these indigents must be provided 200kWh. Providing inadequate services through indigent policies negatively affects women as they have the responsibility of fetching water and firewood. Indigents with intersecting marginalised identities, such as being black women living in rural areas and living in poverty, encounter compounded forms of inequalities and providing inequality services through indigent policies negatively impacts them as they navigate several layers of systemic barriers and social exclusion. For instance, indigent black women experience more inequality than indigent black men as they have the responsibility of fetching water and firewood. Several studies have highlighted that indigent policies are failing people living in rural areas due to limited infrastructure (Fuo, 2020; Kuhlengisa et al., 2022; Pillay & Mutereko, 2022; Ngarava, 2023). ADM is not to be left behind, as a study by

Kuhlengisa (2020) revealed that indigents in rural areas within the ADM fail to benefit from indigent support because the municipality fails to provide potable water because of a lack of infrastructure. The ADM indigent policy's failure to recognise intersecting identities and experiences of indigents is a cause for concern as indigent women living in rural areas who are members of the historically marginalised race face barriers in accessing indigent support because of the location they stay in and lack of infrastructure.

### ***Theme 5: Unintended Consequences***

Another theme that emerged from the data analysis is the unintended consequences of the ADM indigent policy. According to the ADM indigent policy (2023), the criteria for one to benefit from indigent support is that they must have a valid South African Identity document, provide proof that they live in poverty and own the property in their name. It can be noted that this indigent policy tightens any loopholes that may expose the policy to abuse by citizens and entails that those living in poverty benefit. In most instances, people residing in ADM without identity documents and those living in informal settlements are left out of accessing basic services, perpetuating poverty. This finding cements Fuo's (2020) argument, which highlighted that indigent policies tend to leave behind migrants because they do not have valid South African identity documents. By developing this stringent selection criterion, the indigent policies intentionally exclude people living in informal settlements and people without ID cards (Fuo, 2020; Kuhlengisa et al., 2022). It is worth noting that ADM indigent policy unintentionally influences indigents' behaviour, leading to unintended consequences such as gaming of the system.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

In its current state, the municipal indigent policy tends to reinforce the socio-economic inequalities within the municipality which is against the pursuit of sustainable livelihoods. The current ADM indigent policy's contribution to the pursuit of sustainable livelihoods is impeded because it is incapable of properly responding to the basic needs of indigent communities. This policy tends to reinforce rather than alleviate social hardships occasioned by poverty (Fuo, 2014). The provision of Free Basic Services (FBS) in South Africa represents a critical effort by the government to address socio-economic inequalities and ensure basic human rights for all citizens. However, despite these intentions, this study reveals several significant challenges and complexities inherent in the implementation of FBS programs, particularly concerning the

reinforcement of socioeconomic inequalities, geographical disparities, structural inequalities, intersectional impacts, and unintended consequences.

Through this policy, most indigent households have been able to access basic services when compared to before its implementation within the ADM, despite the existence of some constraints more than 33,000 households have had access to basic services in ADM since 2014 when the indigent policy was introduced (Kuhlengisa, 2021). This must be commented on because it is a step in the right position. To understand the instrumental role that this policy has played in dealing with inequalities one needs to understand how inequality is in South Africa, yes one might not understand when South Africa is regarded as the most unequal society in the world. By the use of this bracket approach, one might overlook its contribution, and this requires one to zoom on the inequalities in terms of access to basic services where more than 1.3 million households have access to basic services which did not have any before 1994.

In addition, from the findings of the study, it is clear that the policy is playing a vital role in dealing with inequalities attributed to gender in that as a result of the policy, women are no longer spending most of their time fetching water and are now able to use their time productively creating economic opportunities for themselves. In addition, the girl child is now able to attend all the school days. To some the contribution of the indigent policy towards addressing inequality may be minimal but in municipalities such as the ADM this is a huge achievement considering that most areas are rural set up which were heavily affected by the apartheid. More so, the findings of this study revealed that the indigent policy plays a certain role in alleviating poverty. Access to potable water reduces water-related health disasters as citizens collect water from unprotected sources which are contaminated for consumption purposes. This entails that access to potable water enhances physical health, which diminishes poverty. Another positive contribution attributed to the alleviation of poverty by the indigent policy may be linked to the fact that access to free basic services is key to raising the living standards of the beneficiaries. It should be noted that by ensuring that the services are provided for free most of the indigent beneficiaries who are in most cases social grant beneficiaries are left with some disposable income that would enable them to live above the poverty datum line. This is a clear indication that the policy has played a role in alleviating poverty.

Furthermore, the inability of FBS programs to adequately address structural inequalities represents a fundamental limitation in their effectiveness. While FBS initiatives aim to alleviate poverty and improve living conditions, they often fail to address the root causes of inequality, such as systemic discrimination, unequal distribution of resources, and historical injustices. Without addressing these underlying structural factors, FBS programs may only serve as temporary Band-Aid solutions rather than sustainable interventions for social change. Generally, when one looks at South Africa as a whole, there tend to be discrepancies in the rolling out of the indigent policy, close to 15% of households in South Africa qualify for indigent support and do not have formal electricity connection which entails that they are not receiving free electricity. However, the total number of such households is probably no more than 2.5 million, which does not explain the 8.2 million household gap between the number of households funded for free basic electricity and the number receiving the benefit. There is a lot that can be done to ensure that the policy plays a vital role in addressing poverty, the policy must be tailored to meet the needs of the indigents within the community. This means that the municipality should not use a blanket approach for both the rural communities and urban dwellers as they have different needs. Policy reorientation may increase the chances of successful implementation of an effective system.

The authors are of the view that currently the policy is failing to address poverty and inequalities because of mismanagement of funds as generally believed. This is so because even well-managed and governed municipalities with clean audits are under financial pressure. Miggels and Rulashe (2022) argue that at the centre of realising good governance that will translate into service delivery for the people is a major paradigm shift that needs to happen in government, that will enforce legislation, processes and overall existing systems. This will assist in holding public officials and representatives accountable. We should not assume that good governance will automatically make all municipalities financially viable while simultaneously resulting in genuinely affordable services. On the issue of the creation of employment, it can be noted from the findings that the policy is doing little to nothing to address high levels of employment. This means that the indigent policy on its own can never address the issue of unemployment directly it has to be employed simultaneously with other municipal policies such as the Local Economic Development (LED) and the Extended Public Works Programmes (EPWP). The indigent policy will ensure that the beneficiaries of the

EPWP and LED are left with some disposable income to take care of themselves. Our analysis reveals that certain groups, such as women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ individuals, may face compounded forms of discrimination and marginalization within the context of FBS provision. Intersectional approaches are therefore necessary to recognize and address the unique challenges faced by these populations and ensure that FBS programs are inclusive and equitable for all.

Finally, the implementation of FBS programs may lead to unintended consequences that undermine their intended goals. For example, the introduction of FBS subsidies for water and electricity may inadvertently encourage overconsumption and wasteful usage, exacerbating environmental degradation and resource scarcity. Similarly, the reliance on private service providers for FBS delivery may lead to market distortions and inequities, particularly for low-income households unable to afford alternative options. In conclusion, while FBS programs represent an important step towards promoting social justice and addressing basic needs, the analysis underscores the need for a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to addressing socio-economic inequalities. Future studies may focus on the applicability of the National Framework for indigent policies in different municipal categories to develop an alternative framework that allows municipalities to develop indigent policies that address effective existing socio-economic inequalities in South Africa. Efforts to improve the provision of FBS must take into account the intersecting dynamics of race, class, gender, geography, and other factors that shape individuals' experiences of marginalisation and exclusion. Only through a holistic understanding of these complexities can develop effective strategies for achieving equitable access to essential services and advancing social justice for all South Africans.

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